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Claude Julien

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Claude Julien

> As I look back on my life, and think about my ancestors and my forebears, and the history of which I am part, I try to include all of it in my writing.
> (J.E. Wideman, in Carroll, Rebecca, Ed., *Swing Low*, New York, Crown, 1995, 233)

1 Novelist and short story writer John Edgar Wideman has produced three memoirs about ten years apart: *Brothers & Keepers* (1984), *Fatheralong* (1992) and *The Island* (2003). His multiform œuvre, fiction/autofiction or nonfiction, is characterized by its malleability between facts (the usual material of memoirs) and creation.

2 "All stories are true" claims the title of a short story collection that suggests the opposite through a typographical game in gray and black letters that subliminally brings out the word "LIAR". This joke-like book cover hides a philosophy: each and everyone of us is free to misrepresent reality, mutability is the rule. One may confine this idea to literary creation—words, stories. But stories are life, too. If slave owners said (and believed) slavery was good for their "servants", why couldn't playing with facts be a writer's road to freedom?

3 The term *autofiction* best fits many of Wideman's novels. Fact and fiction are also woven into the memoirs where the author is present in person as well as in personas, as he explains about *Brothers & Keepers*:

> [T]here are poems in it. There are places where the author is trying to imagine what it might be like to be somebody else. It tells you that. So that the techniques and the forces of fiction enter, and are represented in, what is a nonfictional work. (TuSmith, 215)

4 Wideman's family and relatives naturally inhabit the memoirs. *Brothers & Keepers* is an imagined dialogue with his brother Robby, while *Fatheralong* is a letter to his younger son.

The Island is written to himself, as the long "Journal" hints. But it goes one step further toward creativeness by reformatting historical figures. *Brothers & Keepers* came out one year after the last Homewood volume, the trilogy based on family history. It reads like a haunting question about the roads open to black lives: why, Wideman asks himself, did I become a professor and a writer while my younger brother became a delinquent and is now serving a life sentence? *Brothers & Keepers* is the founding memoir, but this essay will mostly deal with *Fatheralong* and *The Island*. Firstly because both are *books of the Diaspora*: the memory of intra-continental migration pervades *Fatheralong*, and *The Island* is haunted by slaves torn away from their homeland. Secondly both markedly break away from traditional memoir forms by boldly mixing life and creation. *Fatheralong*'s temporal manipulation develops into *The Island*'s crossing over centuries. Ideas evolve from one to the other, and so do textual strategies.

Thematic unity

5 All the memoirs insist on lacking communication. Between John—the substitute father—and Robby in *Brothers & Keepers*, between fathers and sons in *Fatheralong*. The cloud of the middle passage hovers over *The Island* which expands this theme to lovers of different races. That islands separate, cut apart, is an all-pervading metaphor. Coming to Martinique threatens the relationship between John and Katrine.[1] It destroys Paul and Chantal's fictional couple in "Fanon". It divides tourists, American or European, from the islanders. All beings are themselves islands[2] that only touch and rub, sometimes: "The island called Katrine. The island called John. The island called Katrine. Called John. Called Katrine. John/Katrine. Katrine/John. Called. Being called. Separate islands. Floating. Merging" (13). The waters that estrange people have erased the "Common Ground"—mankind's African cradle, the forgotten oneness at the beginning of *Fatheralong*. Forgetting mankind's unity is dated differently from book to book. The origin of the fracture in *Fatheralong* is Columbus's discovery of a new world to exploit. *The Island* points out a different moment: the onset of Christianity, "a creed no better or worse than others" (5) which authorized believers to distinguish and mistreat infidels.

6 The evils of racism are the memoirs' leaven. Wideman's preface to the edition collecting the volumes of the Homewood trilogy denounces a world resting on binary choices, "our cultural graveyard of either/or terminal distinctions: black/white, male/female, young/old, good/bad, rich/poor, spirit/flesh" (1990, xiii). Wideman leans here on W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* whose Vintage edition he prefaced. DuBois prophesied in 1902 that the 20th century would be the one of the *color line*, a prediction that proved true as the throes of decolonization and the fight for civil rights criss cross those years. But Wideman disagrees with DuBois's hope of an improvement, "Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoned free" (231). Nothing in the memoirs suggests the racial fracture will be generally healed.

7 When black strangers meet on the street, today's spontaneous "common ground" is their awareness of their race: "the bloody secrets linking us and setting us apart, the names flapping in the air—black, negro, african-american, colored, etc., etc." (1995, ix). "Setting us apart" naturally brings segregation and ostracism to mind, but the qualifying names and the unfinished list designating others sow the specter of in-group distinctions resting on shades of color and other criteria. Worst of all when a separation interferes among siblings. *Brothers & Keepers* has John agonize over his conforming to the dominant mold

while Robby drifted off the accepted course[3]. Why could he not protect his younger brother? Where did he fail? *Fatheralong* joins *Brothers & Keepers* here: race is the curse that prevents him from extending the needed social assets to his younger son[4].

8 Wideman is racked by a feeling mixing alienation (leaving behind the blackness in him) and guilt for failing to help loved ones step in the safe shoes he wears. *Fatheralong* goes further. When he is faced by the last minute reservation of a hotel room for a guest to his older son's wedding, his oversight makes him testy. He is seized by xenophobic feelings aimed at the manager, an Indian immigrant with a skin darker than his own, whom he tries to impress with his status as a U. Mass professor and his *gold* Mastercard—not just any credit card. Beyond self-deprecation is disillusionment, the acknowledgement that racism is liable to creep into any man's behavior or conscience.

9 Racial introspection is even more insistent in *The Island* where the "Journal" shows Wideman's need to know where he stands, a privileged tourist vacationing with his French lady on an island where he might have been held in bondage in earlier days. And the same obsession as in *Brothers & Keepers*—being a successful student—reappears when peacocks bring memories of his stay in England as a Rhodes scholar back to him[5]. This is an important passage: John and Katrine are shown visiting the Latouche plantation rather than the Balata gardens, the floral delight up on the hill. The loneliness and silence are impressive among the ruins where black lives were stolen, where ghosts linger whose sweat and tears bore today's world into existence.

10 A persistent feeling of guilt arising from one's success in a world one belongs *to*, but not *in* ,pervades the memoirs; and this recurrent torment develops from book to book. From brotherly, it becomes fatherly, then personal. The freedom to create also develops from volume to volume, as fiction nudges fact aside to make more room for itself.

Textual strategies

11 Floating identities and reformatted events can be a means of escaping reality. The younger son's arrest for murder in New Mexico is never mentioned as such in *Fatheralong*, and the mother's despair hurts. "I couldn't deal with the pain in her voice so I made up another story" (191), John the father writes. Another story finds its way to paper, possibly to alleviate the horror. Seeking freedom in fiction is legitimate: a text is whole and true at the moment it is laid on paper. If another earlier or later text reshuffles the same material, that text is true too.

12 *Genre mixing* as practiced in the memoirs goes beyond the elation to create. Words build up lands of the interface. Wideman is known for reshaping existing texts, even turning a narrative path upside down[6]. The interviews Bonnie TuSmith collected confirm the presence of an existential posture: refusing separation goes hand in hand with refusing aesthetic constraints, resented, for lack of a better term, as literary apartheid[7]. The introduction to *The Island* hints that Paul and Chantal's failed love affair is a reassuring counter example John constructed to feel his own relationship with Katrine was secure. In other words, fiction was created in a memoir to bolster a real life bond.

13 *The Island* and *Fatheralong* are more creative than *Brothers & Keepers* where the main process consists in having Robby's status change from person to character and vice versa —the same as John. *The Island* and *Fatheralong* are bathed in temporal manipulation— Wideman's hallmark. The introduction to the collected Homewood novels is once again

invaluable to understand his use of "Great Time"—African time far removed from the modern calendar time:

> Do not look for straightforward linear steps from book to book.... Imagine the Great Time of our African ancestors, a non linear, atemporal medium in which all things that have been, are, or will be, mingle freely. (1992 xi)

14 Great Time was later redefined in terms of its literary potential, precisely in *Fatheralong* where people and events are reconfigured: "[T]he always present tense of narrative where every alternative is possible, where the quick and the dead meet, where all stories are true" (62).

15 *Fatheralong*'s temporality is dual. Macro time structures the book by connecting the chapters. Micro time, on the contrary, scrambles the reader's bearings within each part. Right after the abstractions of "Common Ground" have denounced the loss of mankind's common origins, the narration becomes personal as "Promised Land" and "Fatheralong" deal with the relationship between John and Edgar, his father. Then comes "Littleman": venom as the book's core chapter reaches Wideman's ancestry's place of servitude. The last two parts, "Picking up my Father at the Springfield Station" and "Father Stories" deal with Wideman's relationship with his older son, Dan, then his younger son, Jake[8]. The book seems to adopt a quasi chronological pattern (preparing for the trip, the trip itself, its aftermath), but this macro level is elbowed off-balance by the micro level. The narration shifts *backward and forward* (with or without the assistance of typographical markers), which creates the impression of being caught moving endlessly round in a vicious circle: Edgar and John's trip to South Carolina shuttles its way across the book in a manner that suggests the slave past is inescapable.

16 The keys to the temporal manipulation at work in *The Island* are not so visible, but again rest on the macro and micro levels. The "Journal", one daily entry from December 25 to January 11, seems impeccably chronological. But chronology is like an empty shell as there is no visitors' trail to follow. Entries are ruminations on Martinique's signification to a descendant of slaves. Historical leaps backward and forward drown the reader amidst a sea of scholarly and political elements. So many topics are broached, so many figures mentioned that listing them all here is impossible: creolization and survival techniques, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and the faces of US presidents on banknotes, George W. Bush carving the world according to his notion of good and evil, the 1946 referendum, anthropologist Claude Levy-Strauss, the Cancún conference, Bob Marley, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* read as a prison story, the slave ship "Diligent", Colbert's black codes, Napoléon and Joséphine reestablishing slavery, Victor Schoelcher the abolitionist, André Breton, Edouard Glissant, 9/11 as a sense of chicken coming home to roost, etc. This insistent *shuttling through history* is superseded by two entries, for December 25th and 31st, that convey a strong thematic content.

17 Though landing on Christmas day, the festivities meant to entertain tourists are not described. Christmas appears as no joyful celebration, but as a historic rift, the beginning of a new world order hiding behind the promises of a new creed, "no better or worse than others" (5), which the faithful have used to cleave mankind into categories. The December 31st entry discusses slavery which it presents as the foundation of the modern economy based on the exploitation of the weak. No improvement is in sight: January 1st, later called "that ground zero bottom-line moment" (59), is to be apprehended as the signal of rebellion against capitalism. Wideman is writing in his hotel room but dreams himself lost in Babylon: Bob Marley's song seeking a way to honor King Alpha wafts in to

him through the open window. Readers are left on their own to take the biting irony—religious and political—in. Arithmetic helps adventurous readers: the two dates encompass seven days, the space-time God took to create the world according to *Genesis*. That week, in *The Island*, is the moment when the threatening shadow of modern commerce spreads over the world under the aegis of slavery. Intensely personal elements are combined to the "fugue of history" in which the past, the present and the future reach no harmonious resolution. "Can visiting Martinique bring a new departure?" John asks himself on arriving. Such will not be the case. The couple had suspected Katrine was pregnant, which John affected to take lightly referring to the "virtual child" (13) as a "cute little pot-au-feu in her flat stomach" (*id.*). The pitfalls of race affect life even where banter reigns: John teases Katrine ("How do I know what you've got in there belongs to me, girl" (*id.*)) by posturing as the master in a love triangle involving a "Kilroy negro"[9] (*id.*) glimpsed slinking out of the back door. The pregnancy Katrine desired dissolves on the deleterious island where slavery took root: her hopes die as blood leaks out—or maybe no baby was conceived after all.

Colonizing the textual space

18 It is written in the introduction to *The Island* that "Writers can be the worst kind of colonizers, ruthlessly taking over and exploiting a place for their own purposes" (xxv). All memoirs do just that, though to different extents. Using space in *Brothers & Keepers* is mostly limited to Robby's prison, a metaphor for social—racial—harshness. The following memoirs use textual space more intensely. *Fatheralong* has the Widemans travel to the cradle of their lineage in South Carolina, a place called Promised Land, around the time of the celebration of Columbus's much ballyhooed discovery. Irony reigns. Promised Land is very hard to find because it is on no road map and only one signpost points to it.[10] This lost place (in fact the whole of South Carolina) becomes a mirror for unkept promises and progress denied. The past and the present are out of joint. History, even a banal quest for one's ancestors' circumstances borders on the absurd. There is nothing to discover about African-Americans of yore in Columbia where the Confederate flag still is flown over the Capitol. The ante-bellum photo exhibit, announced as "[a] time capsule, treasure trove of cultural history" (145) do not speak to any of the visitors. Littleman ("O, Death he a littleman,/He goes from do' to do'", the blues song says) is the nickname of James Harris, the cousin the Widemans finally meet in Promised Land. Littleman's reputation as the family's memory fount falls flat. His only message is that *history is dead* and generations are encamped on their own sides of an impassable barrier.

19 The many faces of Martinique offer constant and ruthless hermeneutic and heuristic keys. Isolated, isolating, it is surrounded by the *waves of the middle passage*[11]. An allusion to Monticello, like magic, changes Martinique into the island where crippled Caliban was held for life. Ambiguities are pointed out. Martinique is a terrestrial paradise for Du Tertre who called it "l'île des revenants"—the "country of comers-back" (xix)[12]. It is a gulag for the slaves, a made-for-profit land for Père Labat who improved sugar cane crops and the manufacturing of rum for the benefit of a religious order. However, *The Island* differs from the previous memoirs by its shaking free from the genre's conventions.

20 Wideman was commissioned by the Geographic Society "to go anywhere in the world and write about it" (xx). He wrote no travelogue, and turned a tourist resort into a place for

introspection, envisaged the island's past, present and future from his intimate perspective.

21 Genre mixing is nowhere more evident than in the second and third parts, two fictions that denounce the island's evils—unrelieved racism in "Père Labat", then contemporary race-induced obsessions ruining a sound relationship in "Fanon".

22 Jean-Baptiste Labat, a Dominican missionary, first appears as a historical figure in the introduction which mentions his contribution to the region's economic development as well as his conviction, bizarre for so rational a mind, that blacks hold obscure powers. The text then brings up the "creolized twist" (xxvii) that has turned him into a hobgoblin in the local folklore. The "Père Labat" section is told from beginning to end by an extra diegetic narrator. It is a vengeful story striding the centuries. All the evils of slavery, the slave owner's moral comfort and sadistic leanings (Labat takes pleasure in torturing recalcitrant slaves) are embodied in a character based on a man who might have been no better or worse than many others when antislavery sentiment was uncommon[13]. An a-historical fiction, "Père Labat" is made more devastating through its anachronistic ending. Labat's impatience to start on his civilizing mission is thwarted. His ship is becalmed in La Rochelle where the holy man whiles time away in a tavern, spying on the customers, farting profusely to drown the others' odors. Finally, though miserly, he purchases in a supermarket two pairs of expensive Nike shoes to last him through his tenure. This baroque ending fulfills a double function. It first reasserts the contention that *slavery is at the origin of capitalism and global trade*. It is also a way for the author to thumb his nose at a company that had just discontinued sponsoring three university sports activities in retaliation for the students' protesting wages and working conditions in the firm's plants relocated in Asia[14].

23 The narrative system of "Fanon" is entirely different from that of "Père Labat". Ten quotations from Frantz Fanon's works interrupt the story's flow and must be read carefully, as they proceed from militant, even war-like, anticolonialist sentiment to dignity gained from interracial love (130), hope for Algeria's future (141) and finally (in an enigmatic twist to be outlined later) belief in interracial love (144). Other segments allow the readers to slip into the lovers' thoughts, or else overhear dialogues reported by an extra diegetic narrator. Wideman discusses his fictional interracial lovers in the introduction. He describes them as either a "negative talisman" or the result of the "presence of loss and waste, the haunted deadly past" (xviii) visible on the island. Paul and Chantal have something in common with Katrine and John. Paul is an African-American writer so anxious to succeed as a student that he overlooked the fight for decolonization. Chantal, on the contrary, defied convention in the 1960s by going out with African or Algerian lovers. The pair live a great romance on arriving in Martinique, but Chantal's mentioning an earlier stay in the company of her employer makes Paul jealous and ultimately unfaithful. He is not so much jealous of Antoine as a man. He is irked that Antoine's social position allowed him to seduce Chantal. His racial memory awakes on the island, and he transfers to the white world the sexual uses and abuses of plantation life, imposed—or more or less accepted—intercourse. Unlike Paul's, Wideman's own love has survived the test of staying on Martinique and the possible loss of a baby, hence the improbable but wishfully true quotation from *Black Skins, White Masks*: "Today I believe in the possibility of love" (144). Marilyn Monroe is helping Fanon through his last moments in the Washington hospital where he died. Both are particular *revenants*, victims

of oppressions symbolized by their having crossed the ocean in the hull of the same slave ship. Fanon may be Wideman's spokesman telling of a limited hope in a better future.

24 A better future remains a fragile hope, however. There are factors beyond man's control, and disregarding them—whether they result from God's anger or the movements of tectonic plates—will lead to catastrophes. In the fourth section titled "The Island", Martinique's beauties, like the out-of-the-way cove where Chantal sunbathes in the nude, are superseded by nature's violence and Mount Pelée's ravages: the huge death toll when the local government and the people—complacent, trusting in God—disregarded the volcano's warnings. Still, Martinique remains ambiguous. It is the "healing paradise" (159) where Gauguin was able to reconstruct himself after a trying stay in Panama. However, the habitation Latouche where the slaves baptized "the land with their blood and sweat" (160) is close to the Gauguin museum. As if exorcised by Chantal and Paul's literary fate, John's fears about his new couple's future are all but forgotten. Perhaps there does remain an outside danger embodied in a dog, a mutt, following the offending interracial lovers among the Saint-Pierre cathedral ruins. The same dog is sighted once more on the Le Carbet beach, where, like a police agent or a cyber spy, it has trailed the lovers. The chronology is inverted: the couple left on their excursion from Sainte-Anne, and their stop over at Le Carbet preceded their roaming among the cathedral's fallen masonry. Creative freedom allows that[15]. *The Island*'s last part is creative in more ways than one: it stands as a massive seventeen-page-long sentence—perhaps a formal metaphor for continuity, for the inability to escape the past still imprinted on the present, such as when snow in New York makes the writer recall the ashes announcing the eruption that Martinicans called "petite neige".

25 More than complex, *The Island*'s fourth section is an enigmatic *envoi*. Is the mutt-spy a way to scoff at ungrounded racial paranoia? The playful tone and earthy contents suggest just that: the dog watches Katrine squat between two boulders to urinate while John releases "a steaming Mount Pelée burst" (167). The two faces of the world, past and present, slave driver and black man, touch: John's fart is reminiscent of Labat, satisfied with his malodorant self in the La Rochelle tavern.

26 Detecting the creativity at work in Wideman's memoirs helps the reader construct the unity of the author's thought. Those meditations add up to an anamnesis, collective as well as personal. *The Island* looks like a climax in this suite of three memoirs: lush and enchanting as it is, Martinique was an outpost of slavery on its way to continental proportions and becomes the primeval site of memory:

> Why does Martinique take me back. Way, way back to ancient dark places. Isle of *revenants*, of ghosts, of rugged mountains and dense forests depicted in Creole folklore, the turf of monsters, of zombies, of wicked Père Labat, of fabled shape-shifting creatures who exit their lairs at nightfall, lying in ambush at cross roads, beside cemeteries, in the shadows, insatiably hungry for prey and devilish play. (57)

27 The *revenants* that signified terrestrial bliss to Du Tertre are twisted to suit Wideman's own truth. They are not strangers eager to return to a delightful sojourn, but the ghosts that should worry white consciences. These omnipresent victims of injustice have not yet been laid to rest and still trap modern people, even lovers, in "their nasty dreaming" (146). For the *revenants* speaking in the last segment of "Fanon" root *The Island*, as Marriott argues (318), in the line Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* develops in the section dealing with the colored man and the white woman.

28 Evoking a racial mountain, as the title of this essay does, Wideman borrowed an idea from Langston Hughes who, in his famous 1925 manifesto "Negro Youth Speaks" demanded *the right to speak in a black voice and to create the needed forms to do so*. Hughes and Wideman stand on similar grounds. The allusion in my title hinted that the memoirs' racial mountain, like Mount Pelée whose threats the neglected local citizens, is still standing. The whole island stands as a metaphor. Its beauty and charm, its tourist-appealing smile —the amenities of modern life in luxury hotels—hide the individual's isolation and the still gaping wound of contempt and racism. Seen from this vantage point, the *revenants* in *The Island* also haunt *Brothers & Keepers* and especially *Fatheralong* where the antebellum photo exhibit builds no bridge for Wideman to feel at home in South Carolina. Perhaps another debate should start here: the possibility that the memoirs' blooming out of the Homewood trilogy turns them into the driving force of Wideman's œuvre.

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NOTES

1. Katrine is a rewriting of the name of Wideman's French companion. The author's first name is unchanged, which does not preclude fluidity. "John" is sometimes used as a persona, but at other times, the author also speaks in his own name.

2. Although no direct allusion to John Donne is made, the text's anti-religious persuasion encourages banning Meditation XVII—that *no man is an island because all are in God's hands*— from thought. The only god there is in *The Island* is money.

3. An early episode describes the then almost intangible line separating the brothers. John is driving Judy, his white bride, and Robby in his new car. Robby makes his brother uneasy by tuning the car radio to a black music station, the volume all the way up (28).

4. *Fatheralong* ends on a metaphor standing for family tragedy: the Widemans are vacationing in Maine when Jake, their younger son, for no reason, stabs his white room mate to death in a New Mexico summer camp.

5. The reminiscence is particularly acid. This scholarship took him to Oxford to prepare for "the civilizing mission a bandit by the name of Cecil Rhodes called 'the world's fight'" (162).

6. *The Island*'s third part is titled "Fanon". The same name introduces another story in *God's Gym*. The material is roughly the same but the sequencing differs, as the story in *God's Gym* has a more direct narrative outlay. Moreover, the chain of events is unattached as there is no connection to the autobiographical background, the "Journal", that precedes *The Island*'s story. *The Island* compels the reader to approach its "Fanon" characters as doubles of John and Katrine: fictional twins, disquieting but also reassuring if seen as foils whose relationship falls apart. When e-mailed to ask which of the two Fanon stories was written first, the author's answer (personal e-mail dated April 29, 2007) was that other versions existed and a novel with the same title was being prepared.

7. See Julien, Claude, "Figures of Life in *Fatheralong*", in TuSmith, Bonnie & Byerman, Keith, Eds., *Critical Essays on John Edgar Wideman*, Knoxville, Tn., Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2006, 24.

8. The daughter is never mentioned as if her life did not provoke a ripple. Racism only makes it hard for the father and his sons.

9. Kilroy/Gilroy? Can one read as allusion to *The Black Atlantic* here? That would confirm a theory the memory of the middle passage informs the book. Paul Gilroy's study is quoted in the introduction (xvi).

10. The text adopts a misleading strategy. The hamlet is at first described as impossible to find among a maze of look-alike byroads, while the local residents give confusing directions because each of them relies on his own references (92-95). Another truth follows right on: that the travelers drove to Promised Land without any difficulty, almost straight from the airport (96).

11. Wideman's latest novel, *Fanon*, has little in common with the short stories described above (see footnote n°6), but also here projects itself back in the past when sailing was the only intercontinental means of conveyance: "Each person an island in the sea of time. Isolated by the sea, each person's fate determined by the sea traffic, by voyages that risk the seas treacherous currents and vast distances, voyages that seem to master seas they navigate, but any sea mastered is also, always, an island in a greater sea." (167)

12. Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre served in the Flanders army before joining the Dominican order. He stayed in the Caribbean as a missionary from 1640 to 1658. He wrote several treatises describing the local fauna and flora. He also was the first to describe the African slaves' process to turn sugar cane juice into rum. Wideman obviously plays on today's meaning of the French word *revenant* to mean the ghosts of the bondsmen roaming a guilty world.

13. Labat's book is of course self serving. While it does mention Africans practiced sorcery, it describes none of the harsh punishment scenes found in the story—except in the case of devilish practices. On the other hand, Labat is very proud of his scheme to "season" the newly arrived slaves so they live longer and produce more, to improve slave habitat, etc. (228-230). He also describes at length his leading role in resisting British encroachments in the region.

14. See *The Guardian Weekly*, May 11-17, 2000: "Nike Cuts off Funds for three universities". Wideman was then posted at Brown, one of those three institutions.

15. In "Across the Wide Missouri", an autofiction short story in *Damballah*, the narrator frankly admits: "I wrote it that way but it didn't happen that way..." (134).

RÉSUMÉS

Le premier des enseignements reçus de Michel Fabre, "aucune œuvre n'est isolée", conduit à tenter d'installer la recherche dans la globalité d'une question ou d'une œuvre.

Cet essai entreprend de montrer une évolution au niveau des idées et de la forme dans les récits autobiographiques de Wideman. L'idée que le racisme interdit tout rapport sain, non seulement entre des individus de races différentes, mais aussi entre les frères, et les générations, s'impose comme le fil conducteur des trois mémoires de l'auteur. Quant à la forme, le mélange des genres investi dès le départ d'une posture libératrice s'affirme de livre en livre et triomphe avec l'introduction de fictions dans le troisième volet.

AUTEUR

CLAUDE JULIEN

Université François-Rabelais de Tours